

John Robertson of Baslow – Architect

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Summary

John Robertson lived between 1808/9 and 1852. He worked with J.C. Loudon from 1829 until 1838, publishing many plans for buildings and articles on architecture as well as a book of thirty cottage designs. In 1838 he began his contact with Chatsworth, possibly via work with Hurst and Moffatt, and he became a salaried member of the Chatsworth planning office in 1840. He lived in Baslow and worked with Paxton until his death in 1852. He was buried in Edensor churchyard. It is difficult to assign particular projects solely to John Robertson but it is certain that he helped to complete many designs often attributed to Paxton alone. Most notably, evidence is presented that he drew the first plans of the Crystal Palace from Paxton's initial pen and ink sketch. Finally, list of his works is given.

Introduction

John Robertson was a very useful architect who is believed to have worked in Joseph Paxton's planning office at Chatsworth between 1840 and 1846 helping with many of Paxton's works during the mid 1800s. He lived in Baslow during this period. I have researched what has been recorded about his life from books and the internet as well as in the Chatsworth archives and I have received a great deal of help from his great, great grandson, Fraser Robertson. This article gathers together the results. Some authors (Chadwick, Colquhoun, Markham and Naylor) have researched the existing Markham and Chatsworth archives and their primary evidence has been very helpful.

In the light of the evidence discovered by this research several commonly held beliefs about Robertson's life are shown to be incorrect or questionable and this article aims to re-examine his contribution to architecture in the mid 1800s.

Life from 1808/9 to 1840

Details of John Robertson's early life are uncertain except for the fact that he was born in Scotland in 1808/1809 and his father's name was confirmed as James Robertson, gentleman, on his marriage certificate.¹

The first substantiated record of John Robertson is from the period when he worked as an architectural draughtsman for J.C. Loudon in Bayswater, London.^{2,5} J. C. Loudon wrote magazines and encyclopaedias on glasshouses, gardening, architecture and agriculture, all of which propagated Enlightenment ideas. John Robertson was his "admiring assistant".³ In 1834 Robertson was based at Loudon's office in 39 New Street, Paddington.⁴ He was listed as a contributor to JC Loudon's Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture of 1832 doing many of the explanatory diagrams and designs and all the lithography⁵ and he published a supplement to this in 1833 in his own name.⁶ This contains "designs for dwellings in the cottage style" which some consider to be the source of the plans used for buildings at Edensor. Also Robertson wrote instructive articles in the Architectural Magazine of 1834 on varied topics such as "A descriptive Account of the Hungerford New Market", "Elements of Grecian and Roman

Architecture practically explained for the general reader” and “A descriptive account of the Duke of York's monument...”, and in the same journal of 1837 “On the Ancient castles of Britain” assessing their practicality.” These publications suggest that he was a competent architect in his own right and well respected by Loudon even though he never formalised his status by becoming a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects or practising alone.⁷

It is uncertain how Robertson met Paxton and came to live in Baslow. There are several references which state that Robertson came to Chatsworth from Derby some time between 1838 and 1840 and that he returned there after his employment at Chatsworth ceased in 1846.⁸ In the late 1830s Loudon was working on Derby Arboretum and Paxton was occupied with development of the Midland Railway in Derby. It has been speculated that if Robertson was helping Loudon with the Arboretum design it is possible that Robertson met Paxton in Derby although no evidence of this has come to light. Alternatively Paxton may have met Robertson at Loudon's London office as they “were on good terms with each other by 1835”.^{2,9} However I have been unable to find evidence that Robertson had any connection with Derby either before or after his service at Chatsworth.

There is some evidence of an alternative course of events. He may have been working on an informal basis for Chatsworth prior to his appointment which suggests that he might have moved directly from London to Baslow. Between 1836 and 1840 Paxton built the Conservatory at Chatsworth. He is believed to have been under the influence of Loudon's pamphlet on Experimental Hothouses^{10,11} and John Robertson designed some of the exterior garden works and the entrance arches which still remain in place.^{12,13} Robertson wrote letters in 1841 and 1842 defending aspects of the conservatory architecture suggesting that he had a working knowledge of its construction.¹⁴ Swiss Cottage, an “eye catcher” building overlooking the lakes above Chatsworth gardens, was built between 1839 and 1842 and is another possible collaboration between Paxton and Robertson.^{15,16} Also he was paid for designs of ten cottages in Edensor in 1838, again in the period prior to his formal appointment.^{9,13,17,18} Contact with Chatsworth archive about these plans suggests that they were for the houses which give Edensor its character.¹⁹ It is interesting that Paxton went away to the Continent with the 6th Duke of Devonshire for nine months immediately after this and work continued on the remodelling of Edensor during this time leaving the question of how much Paxton influenced the work in progress and how much Robertson acted alone. Letters between Paxton and his wife during this time show that there were long periods when there appears to have been little communication between Paxton and the Chatsworth staff.¹³

A further possible route to his employment at Chatsworth is provided by one of his first formal commissions for the 6th Duke of Devonshire. He designed improvements to Ashford Marble Mill in 1840 not long after he first appeared on the Duke's accounts in February when it is assumed that he joined the staff at Chatsworth working in Paxton's planning office.² These improvements were never completed but there are two houses which still exist on Buxton Road, Ashford which are believed to have been of his design. (Rose Cottage 1158587 and cottage to the east 1335249.)²⁰ It is interesting to note that these designs are signed by JR, Doncaster. Chatsworth Archive holds records of payment to Hurst and Moffat, dated 1839, “for measuring and valuing and making plans” for unidentified buildings.^{2,13} This firm worked in Doncaster so it is possible that Robertson may have been working for them in 1838/9 and provides an alternative explanation as to how he came to work at Chatsworth. In fact he may have arrived in Baslow from London via Doncaster.

From 1840 to 1846

In addition to the Ashford Marble Mine plans of 1840 Robertson is believed to have made some changes to Churchdale Hall, Ashford in that year.²¹ He started the building of Park Lodge, Baslow

for the Duke's doctor which was eventually completed in 1842.^{2, 21} He is known to have been the architect of the castellated Gate Lodge, Edensor built 1840-1842^{2, 21, 22} and may have been responsible for the building of other houses in Edensor when Paxton was extremely busy with other projects.^{2, 19} A number of "folk tales" have arisen, centred around John Robertson, about the decision to erect such a range of buildings in ornate styles and it is impossible to know which version is closest to the events which led to its unique design.^{23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28} Architectural assessments of the Edensor housing are given by Donner and Darley.^{8, 29} One of the stories is that the plans were taken from a design book compiled by Robertson. This book does exist⁶ and no previous authors appear to have compared the buildings in Edensor with plans in this book. Examining an on line copy of his supplement of 1833, Robertson's designs are quite restrained and typical of Georgian cottages and do not reflect the breadth of styles shown by the buildings in Edensor. Robertson showed himself capable of more flamboyant design in 1840 when he designed the Tower House which is the entrance lodge to Edensor, so this leaves unresolved the question of who designed the rest of the new buildings and alterations in the village. The fountain and the stepped wall around part of the village were built in 1841 to Robertson's design and his plans are to be found in the Chatsworth Archive. Also he is believed to have designed Edensor School (now demolished), the School House and Roman Villa in 1844.^{9, 30}

In the 1841 Baslow census John Robertson, architect, was a lodger in Woodside, in a lane opposite the present day Devonshire Hotel³¹ and on 26 June that year he married Emma Farrer of Baslow in Baslow Church. Emma was the daughter of Robert Farrer, school master at the Stanton Ford Charity School and grand daughter of John Farrer who had been a minister of Baslow Church for 27 years.³¹ John Robertson was recorded in Bagshaw's 1846 History, Gazetteer Directory of Derbyshire as an architect living in Baslow and by the 1851 census he was living in his wife's old family home which was likely to have been in the vicinity of Il Lupo across the road from the present day Cavendish Hotel³¹ with Emma and his two children, Kenneth (christened in Baslow Church on 29 October 1843) and Ida (christened in Baslow 17 May 1845).³²

In 1841^{9, 33} Paxton is believed to have designed the School and Schoolmistress's house in Beeley and Robertson's involvement is a possibility. He may also have designed some buildings attributed to Paxton in Pilsley as its remodelling was taking place in this decade.

During the 1840s Paxton was occupied with many projects further afield and the extent of Robertson's contribution to these remains unclear. His initials are to be found on many designs but the extent to which he was briefed by Paxton is still under discussion.²

In 1842 Robertson drew the plans for Prince's Park, Liverpool itself^{2, 17, 34} and the design of the lodges, boat house and the little shelter on the island is likely to have been by him.^{2, 19, 35}

In 1842 to 1847 he planned the rebuilding of Barbrook, Paxton's home in the Chatsworth kitchen gardens to the north of the House and some of the plans and alterations are described by him in the Gardener's Magazine.^{2, 36}

In 1843/4 Robertson started to draw the plans for Birkenhead Park.^{2, 17, 37, 38} He also wrote an obituary poem for J C Loudon who died in 1843. During this period Bolton Hall (Abbey), the Duke's Yorkshire home, was being remodelled and he helped with the preparation of the proposed alteration to some unknown extent as there is evidence that Paxton corresponded with him about it.^{2, 13}

In 1845 he drew some of the earlier designs for Burton Closes, Bakewell as well as a lodge, gardener's cottage and, possibly, the gates.^{17, 39} More details are given in Pevsner.²¹ Another aspect to his relationship with Paxton at this time is illustrated by the following two pieces of

evidence. John Robertson was described as the secretary *pro tem* of the Manchester and Lincoln Union Railway while Paxton was the deputy chairman, in newspaper advertisements in 1845.⁴⁰ Then early in 1846 Paxton asked his wife to “desire Mr Robertson to come up in the train on Monday and bring with him all the books and papers connected with the Manchester and Lincoln Union Railway” This suggests that for a short time at least Robertson was required to help with Paxton’s railway affairs.

From 1846 to 1852

After April 1846 payments to him no longer appeared in the Chatsworth accounts. This has led to speculation that he was dismissed or resigned from the office at Chatsworth. It is commonly understood that there was some dissatisfaction with his work as outlined in correspondence between Joseph Paxton and his wife, Sarah^{2, 13} and other commentators are unclear whether it was Sarah or Paxton or Robertson who may have initiated the departure. It is usually assumed that Paxton appointed the young architect G.H Stokes in Robertson’s place but it was several years later that Stokes married Paxton’s daughter so nepotism could not be the reason for Robertson's departure.

A possible alternative explanation has recently surfaced which suggests that Robertson may have disappeared from the Chatsworth accounts because he went to work at Paxton’s own drawing office which was at Paxton’s home in Barbrook and that there was less dissatisfaction with his work than has been proposed by other commentators. From Barbrook Paxton managed many of his projects unassociated with the Chatsworth House, garden and estate. Stokes may therefore have been appointed to take on Robertson’s role in the Chatsworth estate office.

There are several pieces of evidence in Chatsworth Archive which support the idea that Robertson was not dismissed for unsatisfactory work but continued working for Paxton until his death in 1852. There are four plans signed with his characteristic JR initials which were drawn between 1848 and 1850. Also in a letter written in 1849, Paxton asks his wife Sarah to “let ...Robertson be at Derby by the time I come up”. Further I examined Sarah’s letter to Paxton which proposes Robertson’s dismissal when he had failed to show up at Birkenhead in 1844. The full text is “You will see by Kemp’s note that Robertson had not shown up yesterday. What a very disgraceful affair. I should discard that gentleman. The young man Hornblower is going to Liverpool in the morning to see what is to be done and to do the work he went to do as he has nothing to do here. It had made a pretty stir, his wife is wild I believe and wanting to go too.” From this transcript a possible interpretation is that Robertson’s absence at Liverpool resulted from an incident to do with his private rather than working life which upset both Sarah Paxton and Emma Robertson.

Further evidence that Robertson worked for Paxton beyond 1846 is to be found in three articles written in the Derbyshire Times in 1882 reminiscing about the design of the Crystal Palace.⁴¹ It is well known that Paxton had a very short time in June 1850 in which to convert his famous sketch on blotting paper into a workable form.^{2, 17, 42, 43, 44} Two locals still remembered this feat thirty years later and described their thoughts in the local newspaper. They make it clear that it was someone with the name of Robertson or Robinson, with help from one other person in Paxton’s drawing office, who was responsible for completing them within nine days. There is some discussion about exactly where the plans were drawn, the name of the draughtsman (Robertson/Robinson), the payments to be made and the nature of the drinks which were supplied to help them on their way. However Robertson’s home was identified and corresponds with his 1851 census record. Also reference in the correspondence to his death early in the 1850s points to John Robertson being the identity of the architect in Paxton’s Chatsworth office who drew the first set of plans for the Crystal Palace. Paxton said “These plans ... had ... been prepared by me at Chatsworth”,⁴⁵ possibly the view of a great man of ideas working with an expert technical team

supporting him with the practical matter of preparing drawings. An alternative version to events is given by Markham who says “Paxton took the blotting paper sketch back to Chatsworth the same night. His ordinary assistants in the Estate Office set to work to prepare more detailed plans”.⁴³ Given the very short period in which the first architectural plans were drawn it is quite difficult to attribute all of the many innovative ideas to Paxton alone. Possibly Robertson with his assistant would be recognising problems as they arose and trying to find solutions. These might have been discussed with Paxton as the originator of the design. This procedure was likely to have occurred in many architectural practices in the past and is still practiced today to this day in firms lead by an internationally renowned architect, the final attribution and all the honours being awarded to the head of the firm. We may never know how much Paxton’s knighthood for the building which was awarded in 1851 was in some part based on the hard work and ideas of these and other unsung heroes from the local area.⁴⁶

Robertson would have been the obvious choice for drawing the plans for Crystal Palace in 1850 when speed was of the essence. By then he had been working in Paxton’s planning office since 1838 and had already helped with the erection of the Chatsworth Great Stove (conservatory). The plans drawn in 1848 and 1850 and signed by JR, mentioned earlier, are for the glassing in of the conservatory wall uphill from the present day garden entrance and he may have been involved with the plans for the glasshouse at Burton Closes and the development of the Victoria Regia House at Barbrook which was used to cultivate the famous lily. Several of the latter’s innovative ideas were incorporated into the Crystal Palace plans.

After 1846 Robertson is known to have worked on several projects which are associated with Paxton beyond Chatsworth. He completed many plans at Birkenhead Park where he is believed to have designed the Grand Entrance, the Italian Lodge and other park lodges and the Roman Boathouse^{43, 47, 48} and helped with the design of the Anglican Chapel and lodge and gates at Coventry Cemetery in 1847.^{49, 50} There are several buildings, some built for the Midland Railway, which are attributed to Paxton, which were erected at the end of the 1840s in Matlock, Darley and Rowsley; it may be that Robertson was involved in planning these too. In the 1851 Baslow census, his occupation was described as journeyman architect supporting the case that he was a “time-served” architect and still employed in building design. Had circumstances been otherwise, possibly with the aid of a benign father in law or other mentor, Robertson may have been recognised as the architect of many more buildings in his own right in a similar way to George Stokes.

However it will be very difficult to work out any further contributions made by Robertson to any designs attributed to Paxton between 1846 and 1852 because all the papers concerning Paxton’s private practice were transferred to Rockhills, his house in Sydenham, when he moved there after the 6th Duke’s death in 1858. Most were subsequently lost when the House was demolished in 1960.¹⁹

I have been unable to trace any work of Robertson’s work undertaken outside Paxton’s shadow. He certainly did not make his fortune working with Paxton on the design of many iconic buildings and his family seem to have become working people after his death. Earlier in his career he had the appellation of “Mr. Robertson” in many of Paxton’s letters and Emma, his wife was from a middle class Baslow family implying a certain level of social standing. After John Robertson’s death his wife became a seamstress, his son Kenneth became a joiner and, in later years, a butler on the Chatsworth estate and his daughter worked as a nurse maid and then in a dairy. In fact Kenneth is likely to have worked for the Chatsworth estate all his life as he received a pension on retirement and this continued to be paid to his wife after his death.¹⁹

For almost a year before his death John Robertson suffered from tuberculosis and a melancholy poem written by him from this period was published in the Derbyshire Times.⁵¹ He died on 23 February, 1852 in Baslow aged 43 and was buried in Edensor Churchyard. There is no marked grave and this may be explained by the fact that many of the grave stones were removed when the churchyard was remodelled in 1868 at the same time as the church.⁹ His death record and the previously described census and birth records support the view that he did not return to Derby or to London to live as has been suggested elsewhere.^{8, 9, 52} It may be speculated that consent was given to bury John Robertson at Edensor rather than at Baslow because his contribution to the remodelling of the village and the support that he had given Paxton with many local and national projects was well known and appreciated.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and references

1 John Robertson died on 23.2.1852 aged 43. He was married on 26.6.1842 aged 32. Using the Scotland's People and other family history website there are four possible births of a John Robertson in the time period 26.6.1808 to 23.2.1809 with the father given as James Robertson. Further investigation of these did not result in any extra information which would clarify which birth was relevant. Two of them were in Edinburgh and this might be the link to Loudon who came from Edinburgh. A Paisley record was raised in an on line chat board but the date falls outside this timespan.

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Works of John Robertson

Works with substantial evidence for his sole or major contribution

Date	Work	Notes
1833	Many plans in the Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture	Loudon ref. 5
1833	Book of 30 plans of cottages	John Robertson ref. 6

1834, 1837	Articles on architectural matters	Architectural Magazine ref 4
1838-1841	Entrance arch and external works for Great Stove	Chatsworth Archive ARC/144 unsigned, of the same style as other JR work. Chadwick, ref. 12
1838	He was paid for plans for 10 cottages	Chatsworth Archive, possibly for cottages in Edensor. Duke's green book accounts, buildings and repairs, September 20
1840	Plans for Ashford Marble Mill and two cottages on Buxton Road, Ashford in the Water	T Brighton ref. 20
1840 approx.	Churchdale Hall, Ashford in the Water	Pevsner Derbyshire ref. 21
1840 - 1842	Park Lodge, Baslow	Chatsworth Archive, Duke's Green Book Buildings and repairs, July 4. Pevsner Derbyshire ref.21
1841	Fountain, Edensor	Chatsworth Archive ARC/127, ARC/128
1841	Stepped wall, Edensor	Chatsworth Archive ARC/122 signed JR
1842	Tower Lodge (Gate Lodge), Edensor	Loudon ref. 21
1842	Plans for Prince's Park, Liverpool and for lodges, boat house and shelter on the island	Chadwick, ref. 2, Colquhoun, ref. 17, Pevsner ref.34.
1842-1847	Barbrook, Chatsworth Park	Gardener's Magazine, 1842, Chadwick ref.2.
1843-46	Grand Entrance, Roman Boathouse, Italian Lodge and other lodges, Birkenhead Park	Chadwick, ref. 2, Colquhoun, ref. 17, ref. 37, ref. 38.
1843	Bolton Abbey (Hall)	Chatsworth Archive, Paxton Correspondence, 172
1843	Obituary poem for Loudon	Loudon, J.C., Self-instruction for Young Gardeners, Foresters, Bailiffs, Land Stewards and Farmers. Publ. 1845
1844	School, School House and Roman Villa, Edensor	Bannister, ref. 30
1845	Burton Closes	Colquhoun, ref. 17, Pevsner, ref. 21.
1847	Anglian Church, lodges and gates, Coventry Cemetery	Ref. 49, ref. 50.
1848	Plans for the Conservative Wall	Chatsworth Archive ARC/160,ARC/161 signed JR
1850	Plans for the Conservative Wall	Chatsworth Archive ARC/156,ARC/158 signed JR ARC/155 unsigned, of same style as ARC/156,158
1850	Original plans of Chrystal Palace	Derbyshire Times, ref. 41
1852	Poem	Derbyshire Times, ref. 52.

Works assigned to Paxton but contributions by Robertson is likely

Date	Work	Notes
1838	The Old Vicarage, Edensor	Bannister, ref. 30
1839	Rock Villa, Edensor	Bannister, ref. 30
1839-1842	Swiss Cottage, Chatsworth park	Bannister, ref. 30
1839-42	New and remodelled houses in Edensor	On weighing the evidence, John Robertson is likely to have made major contributions. Bannister, ref.30, Read, H. <i>Edensor 1760-1860 A Century of Change</i> , 1995 in Chatsworth Archive.
1841	School and Schoolmistress's House, Beeley	It is unclear what contribution was made by John Robertson.
1840s	Housing in Pilsley	It is unclear what contribution was made by John Robertson.
1839- 40s	Midland Railway buildings in Matlock, Darley Dale and Rowsley	It is unclear what contribution was made by John Robertson.